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Mentoring Library School Interns at a Distance: Insights Gained from a Remote Community of Practice

Le mentorat à distance des stagiaires en bibliothéconomie : les enseignements tirés d'une communauté de pratique à distance

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Article abstract

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Mentoring Library School Interns at a Distance: Insights Gained from a Remote Community of Practice

Le mentorat à distance des stagiaires en bibliothéconomie: les enseignements tirés d'une communauté de pratique à distance

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Abstract / Résumé

In fall 2020, while working remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we initiated a Community of Practice (CoP) model for library school interns working on a video tutorials accessibility project for Dalhousie University Libraries. This feature outlines the background of the project, our approach to training interns remotely on Camtasia software, the development of the CoP, and our key takeaways as supervisors. While the CoP was originally intended as a source of support for the group of interns, the experience ended up being incredibly beneficial to us in our development as supervisors as we learned to mentor at a distance. We reflect on how our mentorship styles changed throughout the project and explore future directions for continuing the project with a new cohort of library interns.

À l'automne 2020, tout en travaillant à distance en raison de la pandémie de la COVID-19, nous avons initié un modèle de communauté de pratique pour les stagiaires en

bibliothéconomie travaillant sur un projet d'accessibilité des tutoriels vidéo pour les bibliothèques de l'Université Dalhousie. Cet article fournit un aperçu du projet, notre approche pour former les stagiaires à distance sur l'utilisation du logiciel Camtasia, la mise sur pied de la communauté de pratique et les éléments clés à retenir en tant que superviseurs. Quoique la communauté de pratique avait été mise en place initialement pour permettre aux stagiaires de se soutenir, l'expérience a finalement été extrêmement avantageuse pour nous, car elle a permis notre développement comme superviseur en apprenant à faire du mentorat à distance. Nous réfléchissons sur la façon dont nos styles de mentorat ont évolué tout au long du projet et nous explorons les orientations futures pour poursuivre le projet avec une nouvelle cohorte de stagiaires.

Keywords / Mots-clés

supervision, student interns, community of practice, video tutorials, information literacy

supervision, stagiaires en bibliothéconomie, communauté de pratique, tutoriels vidéo, formation documentaire

Background

Dalhousie University was founded in 1818 and sits on the ancestral and unceded territory of Mi'kma'ki. It offers a wide variety of undergraduate, graduate, and continuing education programs and is classified as one of Canada's U15 research universities. The Dalhousie Libraries support various programs through the provision of user-centered services, which are offered both virtually and in-person at five library locations.

In spring 2018, the Libraries began a large project that sought to update and migrate our online video tutorials (McNiff & Phinney, 2018). The goal of this project is first to assess each of our 92 videos for their ability to meet accessibility needs, and then to update them before moving them to a YouTube account to increase user engagement. Each video requires the completion of an accessibility checklist, followed by script rewrites (with input from colleagues from various departments across the Libraries), voice recordings, and video production using Camtasia software. Caption files are then generated to meet accessibility needs, then all files are uploaded to YouTube by one of the project co-supervisors.

This project is still ongoing and has proven to be a large undertaking with many moving parts. The help of staff members has been necessary to meet the goals of this project; in the beginning, we relied on the assistance of library staff as well as interns from the Dalhousie University School of Information Management who were completing their professional internships with the Dalhousie Libraries. These valuable team members were trained to use Camtasia during an in-person session with a librarian. They were then able to continue their work with input from a librarian. Prior to this project's inception, past interns had also been trained on Camtasia and were responsible for creating many of the tutorials that are now being revised and updated.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the change in working arrangements at Dalhousie University, output on this project decreased. Interns were employed remotely during this time, but new interns did not receive training on Camtasia software during their onboarding as in previous years. This was mainly because we were unsure when in-person operations would resume, and we believed Camtasia training should be delivered using a synchronous approach that would be difficult to offer remotely. We were also uncertain how to navigate technical requirements at a distance, given that Camtasia software requires a purchased license and a computer that can effectively run the software. Therefore, the new interns we welcomed in spring 2020 were not trained in Camtasia or assigned any video projects.

However, in fall 2020, it became clear that we would not be returning to campus for the foreseeable future. With the video migration project slowing down and much work still remaining, we determined that we had to find a way to train our new interns remotely so they could learn this useful skill and contribute to the project. Under the guidance of our Libraries' system wide Teaching and Learning Committee, and with the support of intern supervisors across the system, we developed a plan to provide our interns with the equipment and skills needed to create high quality video tutorials from the safety and comfort of their homes. As part of this plan, the project co-supervisors decided that this would be a great shared learning opportunity for the interns and that we should make the most of this experience for them.

Training

The first step in providing interns with remote training for the video tutorials project was to lend each intern a work laptop licensed with Camtasia software. The Dalhousie Libraries own a limited number of Camtasia licenses. For this reason, we wanted to make sure all licenses were associated with library computers so they could be used again in the future once this group of interns finished their work terms. Due to COVID-19 restrictions and the libraries being closed to drop in visitors, we arranged for each intern to pick up their assigned laptop from central library administration at a designated date and time

During this time, we also put together our training materials. As previously noted, Camtasia training had historically been offered as an in-person, live session. However, with a remote working environment thrust upon us, we needed a different approach. We decided to pre-record a training video and provide a worksheet that would guide the interns through the various steps of creating a practice video tutorial in Camtasia. This method ensured the training material would be readily available for self-paced viewing and future reference. Once the interns had their laptops, we gave them a week and a half to complete the asynchronous training on Brightspace, our learning management system. We followed up by holding a live, virtual Q&A session so they could ask questions and raise issues and concerns as a group.

While the formal training concluded with the live Q&A session, as supervisors, we were committed to setting the interns up for success as they began working on the project,

and we wanted to create opportunities for continued learning and growth in the months to come. For this reason, we opted to form a Community of Practice (CoP) for the interns. As a social learning system, a CoP is an effective way to promote and facilitate knowledge sharing and collaborative problem solving in a team environment (Wenger, 2010).

Meeting Regularly

We were excited about the opportunity to create a CoP amongst our interns, and we approached this initiative with intention and consistency. Using Microsoft Teams, we scheduled monthly meetings in January, February, and March 2021, which the interns were expected to attend and use to discuss how their projects were going. We sent calendar invitations for these meetings in advance, thereby communicating the purpose and length of these meetings ahead of time.

While we recognize that attending video conferences from home can create privacy concerns, we encouraged the interns to turn their cameras on for these meetings if they felt comfortable doing so. This helped to personify the interns for us and each other, with everyone working remotely. Most interns kept their cameras on, but if any encountered technical issues or could not use cameras for other reasons, we did not insist on it, and the meetings proceeded with them using audio only.

The meetings took a relaxed approach because our goal was to create a space where formative discussion occurred amongst peers. We began our meetings by asking how everyone was doing, and once the meeting officially began, we went around the virtual room asking each intern to tell us all about what they had been working on, any challenges they had faced, and any successes or breakthroughs they had experienced with their video project. They were given the opportunity to pose questions, and fellow interns occasionally would offer advice or input or share a similar experience. The advice from fellow interns ranged from dealing with technical issues to properly generating captions in Camtasia. Because we wanted to make this a learning opportunity for all interns involved, we were hyperaware of the need to facilitate fruitful discussions. On a few occasions, an intern mentioned an issue they had been having but simply stated that they had figured out how to resolve it. We then asked the intern to share with the group specifically how they had resolved that issue so others could learn from their experience.

Outside the meetings, interns were asked to privately provide us with project materials at different stages so we had a sense of their individual progress before the larger group meetings. At our final group meeting, when most interns were finishing their tenure with us, we asked them to share with the group what steps they would take to ensure their projects were finished on time if they had not yet submitted their final video. Our goal with this was to help the interns learn time management skills from others and learn how others approach solid deadlines.

Once the interns had finished their videos, they were required to share all files with us. After the videos were uploaded to the Dalhousie Libraries YouTube channel, each intern was provided with a public link to their video project that they could include in their curriculum vitae.

Key Takeaways

Throughout this experience, we learned some key lessons about our roles as supervisors and our overall management of this project. Practically speaking, we confirmed that our choice to primarily hold group meetings, rather than one-on-one meetings with each intern, was strategically wise and necessary for our own time management. Holding consistent individual meetings with every intern would not have been possible due to our other responsibilities as academic librarians. Further, as the project progressed and we found ourselves answering the same specific questions from multiple interns, we identified critical gaps in our training materials and how the pre-recorded training video and worksheet could be improved and further developed.

Speaking more broadly, we learned that the project CoP, which was originally imagined as a source of support for the interns, ended up being incredibly beneficial to us in our development as supervisors. At each monthly check-in, we learned more about what was needed from us in terms of mentorship, both for the group as a whole and for individuals with specific needs. For example, with regards to communication, we discovered that the questions we were asking of individuals in group meetings needed to shift from passive, open invitations to more active, direct questions as the interns progressed in their work. While at the beginning of the project we told individuals to “let us know if we could provide additional support,” near the end of the project, with deadlines looming, it became important for us to be more direct in our communication, asking instead, “what can we do to support you?” in order to ensure success.

Future Directions

As of this writing, our new cohort of interns has recently started with the Dalhousie Libraries. We are once again planning to adopt this CoP model with them, and we have scheduled our first Teams check in for after they complete their virtual Camtasia training. While group meetings will continue to be the foundation of our CoP, we have also decided to be proactive about offering one-on-one support meetings to individual interns on an as-needed basis to ensure all interns receive the level of mentorship they need, which will inevitably vary amongst the group.

Our online training materials have been updated to reflect the gaps noted with our first cohort of virtual video trainees. Additionally, the materials have been moved to a different Brightspace location that houses all of the intern enrichment materials at Dalhousie Libraries, across training domains. This will ensure that supervisors can find these materials more easily and that interns only need to look in one place for their supplementary internship training materials.

Looking broadly at how the interns could continue to benefit from this initiative, we are contemplating a structured peer review process between interns, through which each intern could share their video with one other intern and request feedback. This would nurture their skills not only in instructional content design, but also in giving effective feedback in a professional setting.

Based on our experience creating a remote CoP for this project, we encourage other librarians working with trainees, whether library interns or permanent staff, to consider adopting a similar model. Bringing trainees together to support each other and share knowledge as a community benefitted all involved, including us as project supervisors. Reflecting inward on our own practices, we are confident that we will approach our next cohort of interns with a greater understanding of how to mentor at a distance.

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